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Identity Work, Humour and Disciplinary Power

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Abstract

How are people's identities disciplined by their talk about humour? Based on an ethnographic study of a New York food co-operative, we show how members' talk about appropriate and inappropriate uses of humour disciplined their identity work. The principal contribution we make is twofold. First, we show that in their talk about humour people engaged in three types of identity work: homogenizing, differentiating and personalizing. These were associated with five practices of talk which constructed Co-op members as strong organizational identifiers, respectful towards others, flexible rule followers, not 'too' serious or self-righteous, and as autonomous individuals. Second, we analyse how this identity work (re)produced norms regulating the use of humour to fabricate conformist selves. Control, we argue, is not simply a matter of managers or other elites seeking to tighten the iron cage through corporate colonization to manufacture consent; rather, all organizational members are complicit in defining discourses, subject positions and appropriate conduct through discursive processes that are distributed and self-regulatory.

Key words

Identity Work, Identity Regulation, Humour, Disciplinary Power, Control, Co-operatives

Introduction

*‘The other day, somebody asked on the PA system, “do **you** have any clementine?” Then somebody came back on the PA system and said “do **we** have any clementine?” [Laughs]. That is because of the structure and the culture of the Co-op. We are a “**we**”. There is no hierarchy and we are not supposed to say “**you**”. We are not supposed to treat anyone like they are a worker and we are the customer, because there is no service dynamic. So, to be publicly scolded for saying “do **you** have” was hilarious and everyone around me was laughing’ (Laura, Volunteer Member, Childcare).*

What are members of organizations permitted to laugh at and what is taboo? In Park Slope, a New York-based food co-operative, participants were allowed to laugh at admonishments to stick to local rules of speech, but were, nevertheless, expected to obey them. A story about an amusing incident at work was also in part constitutive of a disciplinary regime in which normalization – which insisted on ‘we’ rather than ‘you’ – required that individuals construct themselves as equal members of a non-hierarchical co-operative. Talk about humour and humorous events may, we argue, be both a form of identity work and identity regulation; study of such talk is important because insufficient attention has as yet been devoted to the types of identity work/regulation undertaken in relation to humour.

This research has been motivated both by calls to locate ‘...processes of identity (re)formation at the centre of social and organizational theory’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.638) and the observation that less attention has been devoted to how power is embedded in processes of organizing than to deviations from apparent order (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). The analysis we offer contributes to studies of control in organizations as it relates to identity construction/regulation (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Srinivas, 2013; Ybema, et al. 2009) and humour (Collinson, 1988; Westwood, 2004; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). Previous critical research on humour has focused mainly on actual supposedly humorous events and how people use humour to resist or to distance themselves from organizations (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Tracy et al., 2006). Extant

literature on identities has rarely attended in-depth to talk about humour as a category of identity work or explored how such work is bound-up with issues of identity regulation. This paper focuses on people's talk about humour, the types of identity work they undertake, and how this talk disciplines identities to produce conformity.

We make two principal sets of contributions. First, we demonstrate that in their talk about humour people participated in three types of identity work, *homogenizing*, *differentiating* and *personalizing*, that constituted them as 'good' organizational members, i.e. as loyal identifiers, who (flexibly) obeyed the rules, were neither sombre nor supercilious, did not disrespect co-workers, but who were also autonomous. Second, we analyse how this identity work (re)produced norms which regulated the use of humour at the Co-op and how this fabricated conformist selves. Control, we argue, is not simply a matter of managers or other elites seeking to tighten the iron cage (Barker, 1993) through corporate colonization (Deetz, 1992) to manufacture consent (Burawoy, 1979); rather, all organizational members are complicit in defining discourses, subject positions and appropriate conduct through discursive processes that are distributed and self-regulatory. While the analysis we offer is primarily of talk '...as a representational technology that actively organizes, constructs and sustains social reality' (Chia & King, 2001, p.312), ours was an ethnographic study, and our findings are supplemented by both observational data and analyses of documents.

The paper is structured into four main sections. First, we review relevant literature on identity work/regulation, humour and disciplinary power in organizations. Second, we provide an account of our research design. Third, we present our case analysis. Finally, we discuss our findings before drawing some brief conclusions.

Identity Work, Humour and Disciplinary Power

In this section, we consider the literatures on identity work, organization-based humour and disciplinary power. Situated within the discursive perspective on organizing which views discourse ‘as the primary vehicle through which social relations are produced and reproduced’ (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p.315), our interest is in how people construct themselves and their realities through talk. While substantial, we argue that identity studies have not attended to talk about humour as identity work, that studies of both humour and identities in organizations focus mainly on actual humorous events rather than *talk* about humour, and that research on how identities are regulated through disciplinary power have not analysed how this is accomplished through talk about humour. Further, research on identity regulation has often highlighted the institutional processes by which managerial systems and policies impose on the identities of employees rather than the normalizing power of people’s identity work. As a result, there are relatively few studies of how control in organizations is exercised collectively by people who regulate themselves through their talk about norms of acceptability.

Identity work and Humour

Our interest is in identities as they are subjectively construed through discourse. Understood as ‘...the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves’ (Brown, 2015, p.23) identities are formed through discursive processes of identity work, what Snow and Anderson (1987) refer to as ‘identity talk’, i.e. those mutually constitutive verbal processes of formation, repair, maintenance, and revision by which versions of the self are authored in social interaction and personal soliloquy (Athens, 1994; Knights & Clarke, 2014). These meanings are derived from participation in competing discourses and are organized in the form of identity narratives which, although often fragmented, contradictory and discontinuous (Beech et al., 2016; Clarke, et al. 2009), nevertheless provide people with a sense of existential continuity and security

(Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). To counteract the ‘omnipresent danger that identity studies may become overly myopic’ (Coupland & Brown, 2012, p.2) a major stream of theorising in this literature aims ‘to specify “generic” processes of identity work’ (Brown, 2015, p.24) and their implications for group dynamics and organizational outcomes (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Yet, in this substantial and burgeoning literature on identities and identity work, little attention has been paid to talk about humour and there are no studies of the types of identity work undertaken in relation to humour.

Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the quality of action or speech that causes amusement’, management and organization scholars regard humour as a type of communication that recognizes incongruities in meanings and is accompanied by either laughter or smiling (Berger, 1997; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Research on humour is associated with a broad range of sociological and socio-psychological traditions, which mostly describe humour as promoting stability, cohesion, harmony and consensus (Holmes, 2000). Scholarship on humour has also explored how it is often a significant aspect of people’s identities, inviting ‘...us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives’ (Critchley, 2007, p.28; cf. Tracy et al. 2006; Westwood & Johnston, 2012). Researchers have, in particular, studied how humour is implicated in people’s efforts to ‘learn, select, confirm, challenge, and transform identity’ (Tracy et al. 2006, p.301), adopt and perform notionally ‘authentic’ selves (Westood & Johnston, 2012), and men’s attempts to establish and secure their masculine identities (Collinson, 1988). While the literature on humour in organizations is considerable, it has focused mostly on actual humorous episodes, and little attention has been paid to people’s *talk* about the norms governing the use of humour, or how such talk is not just expressive of identities but identity constitutive.

Humour and Disciplinary power

Overwhelmingly, the literature on humour in organizations that connects to issues of power and control explores the extent to which it is a vehicle for resistance (Collinson, 1992; Fleming & Spicer, 2002) and some critical management theorists argue that humour is inherently subversive or disordering (Collinson, 1988; Grugulis, 2002; Holmes, 2000; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). Others, however, are sceptical of the ‘resistive potential’ of humour, and suggest that the challenge embedded in it is often ‘limited’ (Westwood & Johnston, 2012, p.801; Westwood, 2004), and even that it has ‘decaf’ properties i.e. constitutes ‘resistance without the risk of really changing our ways of life or the subjects who live it’ (Contu, 2008, p.367), rendering it incapable of effecting change in social institutions (Linstead, 1985, p.762). Indeed, there is recognition that humour constitutes ‘...one of the more effective techniques of social control’ (Fine & DeSoucey, 2005, p.11), discourages social infractions, and is ‘corrective’ (Billig, 2005), though only Godfrey (2016) has considered the role of humour as a disciplinary technology. Yet Godfrey’s analysis is limited by its concern with accounts of humour and humorous events in military memoirs and lack of interest in identities. We add to extant research by focusing on talk about norms which govern how humour ‘ought’ to be employed and how these are means for identity regulation.

There is a substantial literature on identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) which analyses how ‘...power seeps into the very grain of individuals’ (Foucault, 1979, p.28) as their identities are shaped through processes of normalization, surveillance and technologies of the self. Most studies concern how managers use HR practices, such as performance management and appraisal systems, or culture management programmes, to engineer panoptic systems of control that promote norms or standards to which individuals are made to conform by being targeted, adjusted and corrected (Covaleski et al., 1998; Townley, 1993). Power, though, is not

the preserve of a few managers, but everywhere, and resides in every action, perception and judgement: ‘...it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth’ (Foucault, 1977, p.194). Disciplinary power operates in ways that are ‘...discrete, regular, generalized and uninterrupted’ (Burrell, 1988, p.21), and productive in the sense that it constitutes organizations as calculable arenas in which people are fabricated as subjects (Brown & Lewis, 2011, p.874). Our concern is with disciplinary power in this less explored diffuse but all-encompassing sense, in particular Co-op members’ talk about the norms which governed humour and which produced ‘organization members in a certain manner’ (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p.316).

It is well established that disciplinary power is exercised through organizationally-based discursive practices which privilege certain articulations of reality and identities over others (Mumby & Stohl, 1991; Townley, 1993). Discursive studies have shown how, through technologies of the self such as self-examination (the constitution of the self as an object that can be measured) and avowal (the creation of the self as a subject that can be verbalized, evaluated and ‘improved’) people work on their selves to become increasingly prototypically conforming (Casey, 1995; Covalski et al., 1998; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). This does not mean that individuals cannot ‘...agentially play with discursive resources’ (Newton, 1998, p.430) because agency is intrinsic in processes of self-meaning. What it does mean is that understandings of who subjects’ desire to be are always and inextricably caught in pervasive frameworks of disciplinary power. Insightful though this work is, empirical studies are still greatly outnumbered by theoretical ones, none focus on talk about humour, and most emphasize the role of official institutional processes of normalization and surveillance rather than the normalizing disciplinary power of people’s self-talk.

In summary, we build on extant literature to argue that how situated participants talk about norms governing the appropriateness of humour regulates their identity work, encouraging conformity; though we also recognize that ‘...under the moral smokescreen supplied by humour, people can [also] express...the ambiguity that they feel’ (Gabriel, et al., 2000, p.194). Discourse centred on humour, we contend, helped create the Co-op as a system of power/knowledge in which specific forms of talk (and other action) systemically constructed participants as certain kinds of people. In contrast to dominant streams of theorising (cf. Clegg, 1981; Courpasson, 2000), we show that there are forms of control in organizations that are not exercised by any one individual or elite group, that are not intentional or purpose-driven, and that affect everyone equally. Our research demonstrates how power and subjectivity are interwoven such that organizational members construct identities as (putatively) ‘good’ Co-op members. The significance of our study stems from its focus on how people enact processes of normalization through talk about themselves in relation to humour.

Research Design

Conceived as an ethnography, this study explores principally how participants in an organization talk about their use of humour and how this talk is identity-constituting and entrenched in webs of power (Grant, et al., 2004). This approach is consistent with critical discourse perspectives which explore what are ‘often opaque relationships of causality and determination’ and how ‘practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power’ (Fairclough, 1993, p.135). Key here is that discourse – practices of talking and writing – constitute the social world, forming identities, relationships and other aspects of sociality, and that these phenomena are fluid, ongoing, practical accomplishments (Hardy, Palmer & Philips, 2000). Influenced in particular by the work of Foucault (1977, 1979), there is a substantial stream of research within organization and management studies interested

in how discourses ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1979, p.49). This said, in analysing the practices of talk by which individual members of a particular community constructed their selves in relation to humour, we also draw on field notes based on observations and analyses of texts.

Case context

Our choice of a co-operative for studying discourse relating to humour was shaped by three factors. First, while the literature on humour is ‘a surprisingly vast field’ (Critchley, 2007, p.19), most contemporary attention has been lavished on a ‘...relatively narrow range of workplace environments: primarily commercial organizational settings’ (Godfrey, 2016, p.165). Like Godfrey’s study of the military, ours is an effort to broaden research on humour into other contexts. Second, while it is no longer true that member participation organizations, such as retail food co-operatives, have ‘not received much attention in the empirical literature’ (Brown, 1985, p.315), (see, for example, the *Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management* and more critically informed studies in *Organization*), little if any concern has been paid to issues of identity work, identity regulation and humour in co-operative organizations. Third, co-operatives have particular characteristics – such as a commitment to organizational democracy, an attenuated emphasis on profit, and a blend of voluntary and work organization structures – that differentiate them from other institutions, raising the possibility that identity-power dynamics might work differently to conventional for-profit organizations.

A co-operative is ‘an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise’ (International Co-operative Alliance, 2011). In the United States there are over 30,000 of these organizations, employing 900,000 people, with

some 350 million members, making them a significant part of the US economy and society (Nadeau, 2012). Our case organization, the Park Slope Food Co-op (described more fully in our findings section), is one of four co-operative grocers in New York and one of the 122 members of the National Co-operative Grocers Association. These social institutions are built around the mutuality and interests of their members, and invite people to find a common solution to healthy and affordable food by linking ‘individual fulfilment to the support and co-operation of others’ (Restakis, 2010, p.239). Food co-operatives have influenced profoundly American buying habits (cf. den Hond and de Bakker, 2007 on ideologically motivated activism) and have played an active role in consumer protection through selective merchandising, education, lobbying and boycotts.

Data collection

Data were collected between November 2011 and December 2012 during which time the primary researcher worked up to 30 hours per week for the Co-op. The main source of data for this study were 60 audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews ranging from 32 to 124 minutes, with a mean duration of 60 minutes. The decision to undertake semi-structured interviews is consonant with our predominantly discursive approach in which we seek to analyse how people construct their selves and their organizations through talk (Fairclough, 1995). Full transcripts of each interview were produced, varying between 4447 and 14654 words, with the mean number of words per transcript being 9114. Of those interviewed formally 35 were women and 25 men: 45 were volunteers, of whom 9 were squad leaders, 13 were full time coordinators and 2 were general coordinators. It was well known that the primary researcher was studying for his doctorate, and all the interviewees volunteered to be participants. Most members of the Co-op appeared (to the primary researcher) to be white and ‘middle class’, and this was reflected in the profile of interviewees, only a few of whom were black or Asian¹. Perhaps because the

researcher was regarded as ‘just another Co-op member’, all the interviews were conducted in a friendly manner, and no one refused to answer any question they were asked. Indeed, except for the fact that they were audio-recorded the interviews were often almost indistinguishable from ‘normal’ conversations at work among friends and colleagues.

Other sources of data drawn on by this study included substantial numbers of informal observations, interviews and work interactions, attendance at all-staff ‘General Meetings’, a bi-weekly Park Slope newspaper (the *Linewaiters’ Gazette*), and the organization’s website. Of these, the most useful for us were ‘opinion pieces’ in the newspaper where members offered opinions and anecdotes, many of which were evidently meant to be humorous. During the 13 months of data collection the primary researcher worked across the organization, making participant-observations on teams working in check-out, cash registers, food processing, bulk stocking, receiving and in the main office. This was the first major research project that the primary researcher had conducted, and he was struck by the importance of informal interactions, featuring what Burgess (1984, p.102) refers to as ‘conversations with purpose’ with people who became not just ‘conversational partners’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.11) but friends and key informants. Observational-experiential data in particular were valuable because they enriched the primary researcher’s knowledge of the Co-op, allowing him to contextualise the responses of interviewees and to juxtapose their constructions of the Co-op with what he had seen. This meant that idiosyncratic answers given by those interviewed formally could be more easily recognized and pigeonholed and dominant patterns of shared meaning identified and (for want of a better term) ‘corroborated’ by reference to observed behaviours.

Both researchers were sensitive to the argument that in-depth interpretive research of this kind is not just a method of collecting data but also ‘...a means of self-discovery’ (Humphreys et

al., 2003, p.7). This was especially the case for the primary researcher who often had cause to reflect on what it meant to be an Englishman in America, in particular New York City, where what he regarded as subtly amusing irony and especially self-deprecating humour marked him as 'atypical'. To minimise the scope for misunderstanding and data loss, the primary researcher sought continually to examine his 'own involvement in the framing of the interaction' and to use 'my eyes as well as my ears' (Silverman, 2000, p.128). Throughout, an attitude of what Alvesson (2003, p.14) refers to as '*reflexive pragmatism*' was adopted, not just in the conduct of interviews but in all aspects of data collection and analysis, which encouraged both authors to embrace complexity, and to challenge the interpretations we generated. Further, what seemed interesting anecdotes, events and conversations were written-up as a series of 'vignettes' which served as a valuable aide memoire and helped deepen our evolving understandings (Humphreys, 2005).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a '...pervasive activity throughout the life of [the] research project' (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.10). In analysing the data our primary concern was to understand how participants in the Co-op constructed their selves and the organization through discourse with a particular emphasis on their talk about humour and laughter. Our approach was 'localist' in that we regarded interviews as having equivalent ontological status to other organizational events and situations in which people 'draw upon cultural resources in order to produce morally adequate accounts' (Alvesson, 2003, p.17). Following Alvesson's (2003) injunction that researchers ought reflexively and pragmatically to draw on alternative framings and theory resources, our processes of analysis were accomplished using multiple metaphors: e.g., we regarded what interviewees said as identity work but also as iterations of cultural scripts, and

as both constructive and political acts. In addition, rather than rely solely on what people said, our analysis was informed by participant observations and analyses of texts.

Data analysis was a multi-staged process. First, in the early phase of data analysis, while the primary researcher was still collecting data, ideas, themes and interpretations about ‘what was going on’ were discussed on a regular basis both with the off-site second author and with Co-op members. Second, once data collection had been completed, we iteratively read and re-read the transcripts and other data sources (notes on observations, documents, web sites) generating dozens of codes (such as people’s talk about ‘cooperation’, ‘community’, ‘rules’, ‘seriousness’, ‘boundaries’, ‘resistance’ etc.) that were continuously refined, collapsed into broader themes and discarded. Through ‘...contextual experience, reflection, practice and prolonged engagement with the data’ (Cassell et al., 2009, p.521) we sought to make sense of our findings ‘in a conceptually coherent way’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.69). Third, from the many practices of talk we discovered we began abductively to link findings to extant literature (Peirce, 1974). It was at this stage that the decision was taken to focus in particular on humour in relation to identity and power as so much data had been categorized using these codes. With these focal topics in mind we engaged in further lengthy and laborious processes in which we sought simultaneously to link dominant patterns in our data to theory on identity work and disciplinary power. These were exploratory processes in which data and theory were successively and recursively ‘combined’, ‘discovered’, ‘complemented’, ‘turned and twisted’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p.14).

Fourth, we engaged in continuing processes of reading and re-reading our data sources coding specifically for those practices of talk by which Co-op members constructed versions of their identities and the organization in ways that enforced normalization and thus served a

disciplinary function. While both researchers approached materials from this standpoint, our individual readings sometimes differed (often in dynamic and interesting ways), perhaps due in part to the sense of immediacy/distance felt by the primary/secondary researcher towards the case organization. Through discussion, we came to recognize three broad types of identity work associated with five practices of talk which instantiated norms regulating the ‘appropriate’ use of humour (see Table 1). *Homogenizing* identity work emphasized commonalities between all Co-op members, was manifest in practices of talk which positioned people as identifying strongly with the organization, and with norms that humour be employed to express positive identification and tailored or refrained from to respect others. *Differentiating* identity work constituted the majority of Co-op members as being distinct from other (minority) categories of people in the organization, was associated with practices of talk which positioned this majority as flexible rules followers and not ‘too’ serious or self-righteous, and with norms that humour be used to support these. *Personalizing* identity work highlighted the individuality of the speaker, was associated with the practice of talk ‘being oneself’, and with the norm that humour was used appropriately to assert one’s independence.

Table 1

Findings

Initiated in 1973, Park Slope, which was located in an affluent Brooklyn neighbourhood, had grown from a handful of founding members into a 16,500 person single-site operation with an annual turnover of \$50 million and a reputation for providing environment-friendly – often locally sourced and/or organic – high quality food products at affordable pricesⁱⁱ. Only members were entitled to shop at Park Slope, and new affiliates had to pay a one-off fee, deposit an investment of \$100 into the Co-op’s account, and attend an orientation. To be in ‘good standing’ (i.e continue to enjoy the benefits of membership) participants were obliged to work

a monthly 2 hour 45 minute shift as ‘volunteers’. Shirkers were penalized by having to work twice the amount of time they missed within four weeks or risk being ‘suspended’ⁱⁱⁱ. Volunteers conducted 75% of the organization’s work requirements, with many always carrying out their duties - food handling, stocking, pricing, accounting, cleaning etc. - in the same ‘squad’. Membership was very stable^{iv}. Issues of policy and strategy were voted on by members at well-attended monthly ‘town hall’ meetings where all voices counted equally.

Park Slope was notionally organized as a four-tier hierarchy: most were part-time ‘volunteers’ and ‘squad leaders’, who were overseen by a paid staff of sixty full time ‘coordinators’ and five full time ‘general coordinators’. However, strong egalitarian norms meant that in practice people regarded each other as belonging to a ‘fraternity of peers’^v. Squad leaders were volunteers, often chosen by fellow squad members, had additional duties such as managing attendance and explaining operational issues to new recruits, but exercised little authority over others. Indeed, work squads often operated effectively with no leader present. Coordinators and general coordinators were responsible for the management of major functions (styled ‘committees’) such as ‘Shopping’, ‘Receiving’ and ‘Food Processing and Office’. There was, though, little conventional ‘management’ of the volunteers, whose duties were straightforward and who generally fulfilled their work obligations diligently. Despite rumours that some individuals were exceeding their authority, contravening norms of equality, or cutting shifts, overall the Co-op functioned smoothly and most people expressed satisfaction with it.

Two features of working life at the Co-op require brief comment. First, the Co-op was a small and often crowded physical space and, whether working or shopping, members were mostly continuously observable and often expressed ‘*a sense of being monitored by others*’ (Lillian, Volunteer Member, Office). As a Co-op member himself, the primary researcher was a node in

an intimate system of surveillance, simultaneously both a watcher and watched in a system of panoptic control (Foucault, 1977, 1979). The talk (and texts and observations) we report were public displays bound by normative requirements imposed on people who chose to belong to the organization. Second, the Co-op was characterised by polyphony (Hazen, 1993), and the practices of talk we identify do not constitute a coherent framework of understandings. Rather, there were tensions between, for example, members' talk about the Co-op as a fun place to work and notionally inappropriate uses of humour, and between their strong identification with the Co-op but desire to assert independence from it.

Homogenizing Identity Work

Co-op members made 'homogenizing' claims that people in the organization had characteristics in common, most notably, that they were strong identifiers and respectful toward others.

Being a strong positive identifier. Overwhelmingly, people said that they identified actively and positively with Park Slope, pointing out that to become a member involved a conscious choice to join not merely an organization but a particular '*community*' (Michael, Volunteer Member, Shopping) '*that is not just self-serving*' (Alex, Volunteer Member, Food Processing):

'It [being a member] is not just about working at the Co-op; it is about being part of the community as a whole' (Annabelle, Volunteer Member, Maintenance).

Moreover, interviewees maintained that other members also identified strongly with the organization, and took pride in their membership of it:

'The vast majority of people here, to some degree, have a sense of pride, belonging and ownership in something and I think that belonging is really key' (Jon, Volunteer Squad Leader, Shopping).

Humour directed at the organization, people said, was a way of reaffirming their identification with it and to other members who had made the same choice that they had to join it, and demonstrated ‘togetherness’, collective ‘dedication’ and belonging:

‘You are a part of this thing and you are making fun of it, but making fun of it actually makes you more part of it, it incorporates you into it’ (Sally, Volunteer Member, Shopping).

Members were adamant that *‘...it [the Co-op] is beloved’* (Cathy, Voluntary Member, Food Processing), that jokes made about the institution were simultaneously *‘...more of a joke on me for buying into this thing’* (James, Volunteer Member, Orientations), and that *‘it is comical, but you still accept it in some way, as being who you are or what you are’* (Gaynor, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing).

Talk about humour and laughter which positioned individual members as identifying strongly with the organization was not merely identity-constitutive but (arguably) specified normative requirements for members to engage ‘positively’ with the Co-op through humour. While the primary researcher was at the Co-op individuals rarely made negative comments about the organization without making it clear that they were strongly attached to it. He constantly observed and overheard members claiming ‘ownership’ of the organization, expressing ‘love’ (e.g. Twila, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing) for it, and obsessing over it. As Karen said:

‘...even with all the complaining, people still want to be a part of it...this funny, annoying, precious thing’ (Volunteer Member, Office).

Being respectful. Generally the Co-op was described as *‘a fun environment for us’* (Jon, Volunteer Squad Leader, Shopping) in which *‘laughter is the shortest distance between two people’* (Mandy, Volunteer Member, Office). Cathy, for example, maintained that:

‘There is an authenticity about peoples’ humour and at the Co-op you already feel safe making a joke with someone, even if you do not know them, because they are a fellow Co-op member’

and you can joke with them because you are both on the inside’ (Cathy, Volunteer Member, Food Processing).]

However, there were strong normative requirements for people always to show respect for other volunteers, and to observe values centred on equity and equality. Members said that they had *‘to be really careful*’ (Rachel, Full Time Coordinator), that they sought often to *‘keep it [humour] to myself and move on*’ (Ellie, Volunteer Member, Office) and even that they deliberately remained silent rather than risk sharing a joke with others:

‘Sometimes people are on tenterhooks, trying not to hurt other people's feelings and to avoid being out of sequence with the community at the Co-op’ (Susie, Volunteer Member, Office).

Members were particularly careful not to poke fun at individuals for any perceived idiosyncrasies, or to make others feel uncomfortable:

‘So he wants to wear his head scarf like that [unconventionally], okay.... I have been in situations where we were like little kids picking on each other; making jokes about each other; that was the main kind of humour, but you just would not do that at the Co-op’ (Twila, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing).

People spoke about how they monitored what they said to ensure that it was compatible with local rules of acceptability:

‘You would think an egalitarian spirit would actually foster humour, because it would be okay to joke at everybody.... I notice the extreme extent to which I do that. How I limit myself there, when I would not elsewhere....’ (Matt, Volunteer Member, Food Processing).

Rather than norms specifying how humour should be used, this talk was effective in ensuring that particular kinds of individually targeted humour were minimized. As the organization’s mission statement asserted: **‘...We are committed to diversity and equality.** We oppose discrimination in any form’ [emphasis in original source]^{vi}. In the 18 months that the primary researcher spent conducting this study he witnessed very little talk or other actions that might be considered to demean an individual through humour while they were present. Talk about the Co-op’s key values was thus normalizing and the power associated with these discursive practices was productive, though what it produced was silence. A rare exception to this was a

Full Time Co-ordinator called Gary who delighted in making sarcastic and mocking comments that infuriated some other members. He was fired shortly before the primary researcher completed data collection. Talk which contravened norms regarding the appropriate and inappropriate use of humour in this instance had material consequences.

Differentiating Identity Work

People made comments which positioned them, and a majority of Co-op members - in contrast to a minority of others - as being flexible rule followers and not overly serious or self-righteous.

Being a flexible rule-follower. The Co-op's rules were an important resource for conversation at work. Most agreed that *'There is definitely a common understanding and acceptance of a level of control and rules.... We have a common set of rules; we are all members and we control the vibe of the place'* (Jimmy, Volunteer Member, Receiving), and maintained that, in general, *'...people are also very vigilant about rules and disciplined about it'* (Fleur, Volunteer Member, Receiving). They said that *'there is a reason why the rules are there'* (Bernard, Full Time Coordinator) and that one ought, for example, to *'put on your fucking hair net while you cut the cheese'* (Barry, Full Time Coordinator). Some even maintained that:

'At the Co-op there are clearly defined ones [rules] ... If someone has not bought into those attitudes and values even though they are an organizational member, in some ways they are an organization outsider' (Rachel, Full Time Coordinator).

And yet, being overly officious, which was associated by many members with longer-serving individuals who *'were there when the rules were all being formed'*, and sometimes referred to as *'those archetypes, the older member who is a bit rigid and rule based'* (Barry, Full Time Coordinator), was itself considered a legitimate resource for mirth. Humour in this instance, they said, functioned to ensure that formal rules and rule-obsessed members, did not dominate organizational life:

'The people who are too rigid, who are really rigid about the rules are crazy, but you do get them' (Twila, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing).

People said that there was a continuing need for flexibility in the interpretation and enforcement of rules, and that humour *'...is the perfect way to establish that you are more flexible'* (Claire, Volunteer Member, Office):

'Most of us poke fun at the bureaucracy; that things are so plodding; that there are so many rules' (Cathy, Voluntary Member, Food Processing).

Normative prescriptions insisted that humour relating to rules maintained and supported, rather than undermined them, albeit with sufficient 'wriggle room' for members not to feel dominated by bureaucracy. One illustration of this were the stories told about how full time coordinators sought to ensure that health and safety rules were followed and how volunteers often responded with good humour:

'He [a Full Time Coordinator] came downstairs, and was giving us a hard time about not wearing hair nets over our beards. He said, "We are going to get in trouble"[laughs] and me and the two other guys, one of which was the squad leader, who had beards, were like "cool, but you have to do it too." He said "I do not work down here" and we were like "well you are down here, so you have to wear one". So we all put hair nets on, hung them over our ears, and were taking photos. In the end, he was laughing too.... I guess it makes sense, hair in the food, but I don't lose that much beard hair' [laughs] (Mark, Volunteer Member, Food Processing).

In line with these comments, the primary researcher observed that squad leaders, such as Sid and Sarah in Food Processing, were often chosen to lead by other volunteers because they took a good humoured, flexible approach to rules. Those individuals who, the primary researcher noted, did not exhibit sufficient jokey plasticity, were poorly regarded and liable to be complained about (albeit surreptitiously) and even, on occasions, labelled 'fascist' or 'Nazi'.

Not being 'too' serious or self-righteous. Much talk, and indeed laughter, concerned those people who were regarded as being overly serious or self-righteous. The primary researcher witnessed several occasions when a volunteer member adopted an attitude of assumed superiority and insisted that others did as they said only to be met with indignant ripples of

laughter. People agreed that even though *'I am from that world and I am so much a part of that world [the Co-op]'* they nevertheless found *'it is easy to have a few chuckles at others who I perceive as taking it a little bit too seriously'* (Paul, Volunteer Member, Office):

'There are things that are unintentionally funny about the Co-op, mostly, the self-seriousness of the Co-op and how many people take it as a cause and a mission. (Charles, Volunteer Member, Food Processing).

Those individuals deemed 'over serious' were universally derided:

'I have seen people make a total scene over the fact that the bottle of Seltzer water is like \$1.03 instead of \$0.97 or something. Going through, returning all of them, and then going to check the price, and then coming back.... we are all sitting there, and when the person leaves we will break into laughter because it's just so ridiculous' (Ellie, Volunteer Member, Office).

This negative *'stereotype of the Co-op'* individual (Ann, Full Time General Coordinator) served powerfully to influence people for whom this was a most unwelcome label with undesirable connotations:

'The majority of us don't want to be identified as those people. Making fun of them sets us apart, "I am not one of those people that take things so seriously"; you are differentiating yourself from them' (Sally, Volunteer Member, Shopping).

Also widely mocked were the not infrequent dead-pan loud-speaker announcements for obscure products, and telephone calls from Co-op members enraged that the 'wrong' kind of product was being sold:

'You hear somebody on the loudspeaker and they are like "is there really no uncultured goat's milk extract for weight loss?" This crazy thing you have never heard of...and you can tell there is a hint of outrage that the Co-op could operate without having it' (Charles, Voluntary Member, Food Processing).

'Co-op members will call and they will be really enraged because "I told the dairy buyer that this kind of cream spoils after four days and I was shopping at the Co-op yesterday and we are still carrying that same kind of cream" ... There is definitely a culture of self-righteousness that I find a little humorous' [laughs] (Patsy, Volunteer Member, Office).

The primary researcher observed that while almost everyone could point to instances of 'serious' and 'self-righteous' behaviour at the Co-op, no one recognized these characteristics in themselves; they were unanimously regarded as negative traits associated with others, and possibly feared or undesired alternate versions of their selves. To make comments that were

regarded by peers as falling into one of these categories was to risk being identified as deviant and accused, albeit most often with smiles and laughter, of being ‘crazy’ or ‘ridiculous’ and to be the subject of others’ humorous asides. On one occasion he heard a squad leader (Gaynor) make fun of another squad leader who reportedly said *‘I am not here to make friends; I just want volunteer members to work hard’*. Talk about when humour was appropriately deployed was, in this instance, he thought, used to enforce normative behavioural requirements. A community bound by talk about humour was thus also policed through talk about humour.

Personalizing Identity Work

People articulated personalised versions of their selves as independent, individuated people who had chosen to join the Co-op and who used humour to insist they were members on their own terms.

Being oneself. Although humour was generally associated with normative pressures on members to say they identified strongly with the Co-op, obeyed (flexibly) the rules, did not demean others and were not too serious or self-righteous, on occasions individuals also said that humour served more personal identity work purposes. Some, such as Patsy (Volunteer Member, Office) were adamant that *‘...you should not have to walk around on egg shells; you should be able to be yourself’*. Humour was, for many, a means of constructing themselves as autonomous and individuated:

‘It is an ego thing, “don’t tell me what to do, I will do the right thing, but I am going to do it with a sense of humour. If you just feel like you are following the rules the whole time, then you start to feel a bit like a robot, so it gives people a sense that they are real people; we are individuals’ (Cathy, Volunteer Member, Food Processing).

People said that they employed humour in order to assert *‘breathing room’* (James, Volunteer Member, Orientations) and to emphasize that being a Co-op member was only one aspect of their identities:

‘When you joke around ... you are emphasising “... I am here because I want to be here; I choose to be here and I am going to be here on my own terms’ (Sarah, Volunteer Squad Leader, Food Processing).

‘....it [joking about the Co-op] is an acknowledgement that I am part of this organization, but I am also outside of this organization’ (Chris, Volunteer Member, Shopping).

The primary researcher observed many examples of members putting these sentiments into action. For example, he witnessed people coming late for shifts and clocking-off early in order to minimize their time on-site (referred to at the Co-op as ‘time theft’). Members who felt unjustly ‘put upon’ would often respond with verbal retorts that left others in no doubt that they had crossed a line. Once, the primary researcher asked a woman to move to a different checkout; rather than comply, she replied *‘Listen here, I will go to whichever checkout I want to, this is still America God damn it!’^{vii}* This, and other statements were both identity defining, emphasising that the speakers were independent-minded, sovereign individuals, and also normalizing: they asserted the normalized expectation that Co-op members should be self-governing and justifiably use humour to express their individual preferences.

To summarize, despite members generally only working a brief shift each month we found near-uniform agreement among members regarding what was considered ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ use of humour. This is not to say that the Co-op was tension-free, and indeed there were occasional reports of overt racism (Welch, 2010). There were also divisions between new and long-established members, and between those whose priority was to be able to purchase high quality relatively inexpensive food and others who were ideologically motivated. However, overall, high levels of conformity were suggestive that the Co-op attracted like-minded people who agreed on, for example, the importance of cooperation and teamwork, care for the environment, and respect for others. It was also arguably testament to the effectiveness of seemingly unmanaged processes of social control. As Fleur (Volunteer Member, Receiving) said, the Co-op was *‘held in such high regard, like religion’* but this meant not just that it was

beloved, but that being there dictated what could be said and what could be done, and notably ‘*how much people can use their senses of humour*’.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss further our two principal sets of contributions. First, we consider the contribution to the literature on identity work and identity regulation we have made by analysing how talk about norms governing the appropriate use of humour function to construct ‘conformist selves’ (cf. Casey, 1995). In so doing, we add also to the literature on humour in organizations by showing how talk about it has important implications for how identities are formed and power exercised. Second, we examine our contribution to the broader literature on control in (cooperative) organizations. Our argument is that control is not merely exercised with intentionality by specific individuals or groups, but is an emergent and seductive property of sustained collective talk and action. Finally, we consider some limitations of our study and directions for further research before drawing brief conclusions.

Identity Work, Humour and Normalization

While some identity scholars treat identity work as a single undifferentiated category of activity, others have begun the task of specifying different kinds of identity work and how these are implicated in organizational processes and outcomes (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our study contributes to these efforts to specify types of identity work processes, to explain how they connect to organizational and group dynamics, and their consequences for organizing.

Three dominant forms of identity work were evident in our data: homogenizing, differentiating and personalising. Through *homogenizing* identity work people articulated claims that they

were similar to other organizational members. This talk constructed Co-op members as sharing specific characteristics (strong, positive identification and respect for others) that defined them. People engaged in *differentiating* identity work to assert that they were different from a minority of other members of the organization - flexible (not un-thinking) rule-followers and not unduly serious or self-righteous - and therefore 'typical' organization members rather than idiosyncratic outliers with supposedly undesirable characteristics. People participated in *personalizing* identity work to claim an identity independent from the Co-op. This identity talk was individuating and constructed people as autonomous, reflexive, sovereign and self-determining. These findings are important because they demonstrate how humour is employed in different types of identity work, permitting both a more fine-grained appreciation of the ways selves are constituted through talk and the processes by which normalization is accomplished.

While 'identity work' is most often regarded as an expression of agency, this research has shown that talk about it is structured by disciplinary power. That is, people's talk about the norms governing the use of humour was also a form of identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Our study contributes to the literatures on both humour and the regulation of identities. First, while studies of joking, comedy and laughter have sometimes found the subversive potential of humour to '...have habitually been contained or co-opted by the dominant position' (Westwood, 2004, p.777; cf. Linstead, 1985), our research has demonstrated *how* this is accomplished. Members' discursive identity work centred on humour transformed participants into managed and self-managing subjects through interlocking processes of normalization enforced through articulations of the appropriateness and inappropriateness of humour. Second, following Alvesson and Willmott (2002) studies of identity regulation have tended to focus on specific managerial (mostly HR and culture change) programmes and policies rather than discourse, and while it is well established that power is

exercised discursively (Mumby & Stohl, 1991), little attention has been paid to the normalizing power of discursive identity work. Our argument has been that identity talk centred on norms governing humour was concomitantly an articulation and instantiation of those norms constituting the Co-op as a regime of power (Foucault, 1979). Processes of normalization were supported through surveillance (by other Co-op members), correction (through talk about breaches of norms, and actual humour designed to punish those who contravened norms), and technologies of the self (people evidently monitored and corrected their talk in accordance with norms).

Humour, Control and Resistance in Cooperative Organizations

Our contribution to the literature on control has been to show that it is not merely a ‘technology of manipulation exercised by men as decision makers’ (Clegg 1975, p.52), but a collective accomplishment of people in organizations. In so doing, our study stands in contrast to much – albeit sophisticated – theorising focused on ‘corporate colonization’ (Deetz 1992), and ‘manufacturing consent’ (Burawoy 1979), which pivots on the central dynamic of workers reacting to and resisting managerial mechanisms and practices. Rather than employee identities being constructed or regulated in ways that reproduce managerially defined ideologies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), we have analysed how all organizational members were complicit in exercising control discursively, mutually ruling in and out certain ways of talking and acting by instantiating norms that licensed and prohibited what could and could not be said and done. Through talk, power was exercised over what was ‘appropriate and responsible conduct’, that is ‘the conduct of conduct’ the performance of which shapes individuals’ subjectivities and their everyday decisions and actions (Doolin, 2002, p.375). This power is less visible, more insidious, seductive, pervasive and totalizing, infiltrating even notionally ‘un-managed’ spaces in organizations (Gabriel, 1995); it is a ‘soft coercion’ sustained in part

‘by the reflexivity of actors, who “choose” to obey because they consider that it can be the most efficient way of surviving’ (Courpasson, 2000, p.154; Barker, 1993).

Our study is, to an extent, a critique of official versions of organizations, in particular cooperative enterprises, as ‘comforting utopia[s] in which empowered and committed’ members ‘work as equal partners’ (Grey & Garsten, 2001, p.237). Representations of cooperatives tend often to depict them as ‘altruistic’, ‘egalitarian’ ‘living experiments in democracy’ (Gupta, 2014, p.106) which exhibit ‘less of the perverse effects of share-holder value’ (Oorschot, et al., 2013, p.65). Such analyses are, we suggest, not entirely unproblematic because they de-emphasize how practices of normalization are intrinsic to processes of cooperative organizing, establishing and maintaining a common language, understandings of the world, and subject positions. At Park Slope, talk about humour was governed by a moral *raison d’être* provided by ideological assumptions that favoured loyal identification, equality and acceptance of difference, and for members this constituted ‘a context of conformity’ where power was ‘systematically legitimized’ (Courpasson, 2000, p.157). Of course, talk about humour was just one highly regulated discourse among others that meant working life at the Co-op was predictable. In short, a participative, democratic, largely non-hierarchical organization in which most people worked relatively infrequently, formal official sanctions were rare, and punitive action almost unheard of, was nevertheless a tautly constraining regime of power.

Recognizing that power is everywhere means that there is less scope for an ‘authentic, pristine space of resistance’ (Kondo, 1990, p.224), but this does not mean that control is ever total, that people do not defend their autonomy, or that relations of power are stable (Courpasson, 2000; Mumby, 2005). At Park Slope, people often engaged in irony, satire and parody and mocked

the rules and quirks of the Coop, as well as those regarded as serious and self-righteous. These were ‘subtle subversions’ and ‘ambiguous accommodations’ rather than some form of ‘worker recalcitrance’ (Mumby, 2005, p.36), and yet this ‘decaf resistance’ (Contu, 2008) was not without significance. Such talk and action highlighted key struggles within the Co-op regarding how rigidly rules should be adhered to and surfaced important differences in people’s motivations for Co-op membership: for some it was just a means of purchasing high quality food items at low cost whereas others (often those deemed overly serious or self-righteous) were explicitly ideologically motivated by concerns with equality, democracy, environmentalism, animal welfare, and consumer rights. People’s talk about humour was a tussle for discursive control over the identity of the Co-op and what it meant to be a ‘good’ Co-op member: it was an attempt to ‘fix’ meanings and thus to (re)produce existing relations of power and control, but these were evidently both contingent and precarious.

Limitations and further research. As has often been observed humour and laughter are bound to context ‘...such that they are both productive of and reflect the circumstances of their production’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.226), and like other case studies our findings incorporate unique aspects of our focal organization. This said, our contention is that similar-type processes to those we discuss occur across different kinds of work and non-work organizations in different industry sectors and national settings. The significance of our research is that it demonstrates how, in all social contexts, people’s talk recursively constitutes and disciplines both their identities and their organizations, and thus how micro-level practices (of talk) are intertwined with macro-level processes (of normalization and control). While we have highlighted these dynamics with respect to people’s talk about humour, identity talk related to many other topics – such as an organization’s dominant rituals and routines, preferred attire for staff, accepted versions of its history, and its most venerated heroes and heroines etc.

– is also likely to be normalized and normalizing. In short, we hope that our paper will be the spur to an ongoing stream of research which explores how different forms of identity work are implicated in organizational processes and outcomes.

Conclusions

Our interpretive analysis of humour has done more than expose ‘...the usually hidden paradoxes and ambiguities of organizational life’ (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, 518); it has cast light on the normative power that inheres in organizations. Recognition that talk about humour is caught in relations of power/knowledge helps to render its social signification visible so that we can recognize how such talk (and the humour it sanctions) strengthens dominant discourses (Collinson, 1988; Foucault, 1979). Scholars have observed that analyses of humour permit analysts to ‘...tap into a rich source of information for understanding the dynamics of individual and group life in organizations’ (Kahn, 1989, p.46), but have often over-emphasized its consequences as benign or efficacious. If ‘by laughing at power, we expose its contingency’ (Critchley, 2007, p.24) then by talking about when we are normally permitted to laugh we reveal power to be intrinsic to discursive processes of organizing. As Billig (2005) has made clear, humour is not a decorative adornment associated with local discourse but rather ‘...a serious part of conversational language’ (p.192) the application rules of which are ‘discouraging [of] infractions’ (p.199). This is true even for Co-op members working as unpaid volunteers in a collective enterprise.

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Table 1

Identity Work, Practices of Talk and Normalization

Types of Identity Work	Practices of Talk	Norms Regulating the Use of Humour
Homogenizing	Being a Strong Identifier Being Respectful	Humour is used appropriately to express strong positive identification with the Co-op Humour ought to be tailored (or refrained from) to respect the rights and feelings of Co-op members
Differentiating	Being a Flexible Rule Follower Not Being 'Too' Serious or Self-Righteous	Humour is an acceptable way of showing that one follows the rules flexibly Humour is appropriately employed to show that one is not too serious or self-righteous
Personalizing	Being Oneself	Humour may be used to assert one's individuality

Notes

ⁱ Interviewees typically described themselves either as educated professionals, such as lawyers, managers and photographers, or as students, artists, musicians and dance/yoga instructors. Most identified as New Yorkers, a few said they were from other states (e.g., California, Virginia), and three were from overseas (Australia, New Zealand and France). Ethnicity was important to some white interviewees, who said they were 'Irish-American', 'Italian-American' or 'Jewish-American'. Their membership of the Co-op varied from 1 to 20 years.

ⁱⁱ There are no large national grocery chains (such as Walmart) in NYC. There are some small local (relatively expensive) grocery chains.

ⁱⁱⁱ Members were able to apply for absence due to disability; temporarily swap shifts with another member; attend a general meeting for credit and take a year off for maternity.

^{iv} Membership of Park Slope was very stable, and while this research was conducted took on relatively few new members due to the constraints imposed by its physical premises. This said, some members did leave because they were unable to keep-up with their work commitments, due to the excessive queues they experienced at the check-out, because they moved away from the neighbourhood, and for ideological reasons.

^v In part for this reason, but also because there were no discernible differences in the talk of full-time paid staff and volunteers, we have not sought to differentiate between different categories of staff in our analysis.

^{vi} Racial and ethnicity-related tensions were evident. For example, Liz Welch in the *Linewaiters' Gazette* (2010, p.3) reported this incident: 'He [a young black member] was stocking shelves during his work shift when an elderly [white] woman rammed him with her shopping cart. When he asked her why she did not simply ask him to move, she said... "I do not speak to sub-humans".'

^{vii} In defence of the primary researcher, on this occasion it was his role to assign people to checkouts in order to manage the queue effectively.